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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR OES/IHA, EUR/AGS (VIKMANIS KELLER), AND EUR/PGI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [PREL](#) [CASC](#) [AU](#) [WHO](#)

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON AVIAN AND PANDEMIC

INFLUENZA: AUSTRIAN RESPONSE

REF: STATE 209622

1. Enclosed, are Post's responses to the questions in reftel.

A) PREPAREDNESS/COMMUNICATION

Q: Does the government have a preparedness plan/strategy for preventing avian flu from becoming a pandemic and containing a pandemic once it occurs? If the country has a strategy, how capable is it of implementing it? Please provide a copy of the plan or the Internet address for the plan.

A: Since March 2000, Austria has had a contingency plan on avian influenza and Newcastle disease (Krisenplan Aviaere Influenza und Newcastle Disease). In addition, the Austrian government published an Influenza Pandemic Plan (Influenza Pandemieplan, Strategie fuer Oesterreich) in September 2005, which covers measures, competent authorities, diagnostic, clinical and hygienic measures, media, and communication, as well as the regulatory framework. In order to prevent Austrian poultry and domestic birds from contracting avian flu from migratory birds, an ordinance on the mandatory confinement of poultry and domestic birds indoors came into force on October 22, 2005 and will end on December 15, 2005 (Verordnung der Bundesministerin fuer Gesundheit und Frauen zur Verhinderung der Einschleppung der Gefluogelpest). If necessary, Austrian authorities may extend the ordinance. Austria is highly capable of implementing this strategy. The Pandemic Plan and additional information on avian and pandemic influenza is available on the homepage of the Austrian Ministry of Health and Women at www.bmgf.gv.at.

Q: How truthful will the government be in reporting the scope of any disease outbreak among people? Among animals? What incentives could be offered that would likely result in more transparency?

A: The Austrian government will be very forthcoming and transparent in its reporting of the scope of any disease outbreak among people and among animals. Incentives are not needed.

Q: Where does preparing for an avian flu human pandemic rank among government priorities? Who and what would most influence the country to give the issue a higher priority? Who is the key "go-to" person, office or department (i.e. Minister for Health, Prime Minister, etc.) for USG officials to engage on this issue?

A: Preparing for an avian flu human pandemic is a high priority of the federal government. However, the Ministry of Health is also emphasizing that there is no reason for "panic" and that an outbreak of the disease is very unlikely in the near future in Austria. The key authority for avian flu issues is the Austrian Ministry for Health and Women (Bundesministerium fuer Gesundheit und Frauen).

The contact for the consumer health and national veterinary administration is:

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The contact for the national contingency plan is:

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Q: Have national laws been reviewed to ensure that they are consistent with the international health regulations and do not pose barriers to avian influenza detection, reporting, containment, or response?

A: Yes. The pandemic plans on avian and human influenza specifically refer to the WHO international health regulations and recommendations, as well as to EU guidelines.

Q: Is the host country already working with international organizations or other countries on the avian flu issue? Are government leaders likely to ask for assistance from the U.S. or other countries? Would government leaders be receptive to messages from U.S. leaders through a bilateral approach, at a multilateral forum such as the UN (WHO, FAO, etc.) or APEC, or through bilateral contacts by a third country? What would the country want from the U.S. in return for its efforts?

A: Austria is already working with international organizations (e.g. the WHO) and other countries (mainly EU countries) on the avian flu issue. In the case of a major outbreak the GOA would ask for assistance, if the GOA believed it could benefit from it. Government leaders would be receptive to messages at a multilateral forum and also on a bilateral basis.

Q: Does the country currently administer annual flu shots? If not, might it consider doing so? What is the production capability (i.e. how many doses of the annual trivalent flu vaccine can the country make) for human influenza vaccines in the country? Does the country produce influenza vaccine for poultry and if so how much? If the country is developing an H5N1 vaccine, where is it in production and testing? Any licensing issues? Is there a liability shield for foreign makers/donors of vaccines? If not, any prospects of one being enacted?

A: Austria does have a yearly updated "vaccination plan" that includes voluntary flu shots. 17% of the population receives the vaccine regularly. The GOA does not produce human influenza vaccines. Pharmacies purchase the vaccine from pharmaceutical companies according to estimates about the amount of vaccines needed within the vaccination period. It appears that in 2005, they underestimated the demand due to more people requesting the flu shot. Vaccines from abroad need an import license.

Austria does not produce influenza vaccine for poultry. Currently, there is no approved poultry vaccine against avian flu within the EU. In Austria, preventive poultry vaccination is prohibited. However, in the case of a major outbreak of avian flu, Austrian authorities might allow vaccinations on an exceptional basis, but this is not very likely.

The GOA is cooperating with the Austrian subsidiary of the U.S. firm Baxter to produce a prophylactic human influenza vaccine in the case of a looming pandemic. The Austrian Product Liability Act is valid for pharmaceuticals, including vaccines. A producer or an importer is liable for damage irrespective of who is at fault. The exception is the so-called "development risk." For example, if the party at fault is unknown or cannot be determined, including in instances involving an unknown virus, an importer cannot be made liable.

Q: How well informed is the population about the avian flu threat and about measures they should take to mitigate the threat? What mechanisms are available for providing additional information to the population, particularly in rural areas, and how effective are these measures?

A: The Austrian public is well informed about the avian flu threat through the media. The government is also asking the public to report sightings of all dead birds to the authorities. Austrian poultry growers must register with the authorities. The Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety (Oesterreichische Agentur fuer Gesundheit und Ernaehrungssicherheit) installed a telephone hotline, where the public can receive information on avian flu. The hotline phone number is: 43-50555-6666.

B) SURVEILLANCE/DETECTION

Q: How capable are the medical and agriculture sectors of detecting a new strain of influenza among people or animals respectively? How long might it take for cases to be properly diagnosed, given other endemic diseases? Can influenza viruses be sub-typed in the country, if so by whom, and if not where are they sent? Does the country send samples to a WHO/EU/U.S. reference laboratory?

A: According to the Pandemic Plan, the medical sector has a surveillance program in place. There are two "competence centers," which are responsible for this program. These are The Institute for Medical Microbiology and Hygiene in Vienna, which cooperates with The Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES), and the Institute for Virology at the Medical University of Vienna. The system is based on the "Sentinella Reporting System," where a network of doctors screens patients on a weekly basis, who are under suspicion of carrying the influenza virus. The results are sent to AGES. Health insurance companies in the Austrian states also have to report all cases of influenza. The agricultural sector is carrying out a surveillance program on avian flu. Authorities test approximately 5000

wild and domestic birds annually for avian influenza. Results from these test samples are available in one to two days. In the case of a positive result, a second test is performed. A definitive result is available after 3 to 4 days. The reference laboratory of the Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES) tests for viruses in birds.

In case of an occurrence of a virus-isolate, the authorities would automatically forward the isolate to the WHO. Among European countries there is an information exchange system on the epidemiology situation in Europe, the European Influenza Surveillance System (EISS).

Q: What are the critical gaps that need to be filled in order to enhance the country's disease detection and outbreak response capabilities? What is the country's greatest need in this area from the U.S. or international organizations?

A: There are no critical gaps in Austria's disease detection and outbreak response capabilities at the moment.

C) RESPONSE/CONTAINMENT

Q: Does the country have a stockpile of medications, particularly of antivirals, and if so, how much? If some has been ordered, how much and when is it expected?

A: The GOA plans to stockpile antiviral medications for 25% of the population, or approximately two million people. The Ministry of Health and Women is still negotiating with the producer of Tamiflu, the antiviral that is seen to be most effective, concerning the purchase of these medications. Some provincial Austrian states have already ordered Tamiflu and will be stockpiling them.

Q: Does the country have a stockpile of pre-positioned personal protective gear?

A: The government has stockpiles of protective gear for people, such as hospital personnel, who would be particularly exposed to the virus. The Pandemic Plan advises that protective gear be available for the entire population in case of an outbreak of the disease, but the government has not stockpiled enough equipment for the entire population. The GOA is considering recommending to the public that they stockpile equipment, such as masks, themselves.

Q: What is the rapid response capacity for animal and human outbreaks? Are guidelines in place for the culling and vaccination of birds, disinfection of facilities, and limitations on animal movement?

A: The Austrian Contingency Plan and the Pandemic Influenza Plan are both in place. Both elaborate the guidelines for the culling of birds, the disinfection of facilities, and the limitations on animal movement. The legal basis for the measures are in the Austrian Epizootic Act (Tierseuchengesetz, RGBL. Nr. 177/1909) and in the Austrian Avian Flu Ordinance (Geflügelpest-Verordnung, BGBL. Nr. 465/1995).

Q: How willing and capable is the government of imposing quarantines and social distancing measures (closing schools, public gatherings, mass transit)? Would its military enforce quarantines?

A: Current plans do not foresee imposing quarantines or related restrictions. The GOA only provides for hygienic measures in case of human bird flu infections. If necessary, the GOA has sufficient police and military personnel and equipment to impose and enforce quarantines.

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